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Critics Shift Focus to CIA Effectiveness, Turner Says

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WASHINGTON—After two years on the job, CIA Director Stansfield Turner says he has seen a dramatic change in the nature of attacks on his agency.

These days, he says, detractors are more likely to accuse the CIA of failing to obtain important information than of breaking the law.

From the standpoint of the nation's embattled corps of professional spies, who have suffered through five years of controversy over assassination plots, drug experiments and other abuses, the change in focus is no doubt welcome.

But for Turner personally, the latest twist in the long-running CIA debate could prove uncomfortable.

No one, after all, could accuse Turner, who came to the agency in 1977, of complicity in a plot to murder Fidel Castro in 1963. But some critics—many of them longtime friends of the CIA—are grumbling that Turner's brusque style and other qualities have demoralized the agency and that, as a result, the quality of its work has been seriously eroded.

In an interview recently, Turner mused about the change in the emphasis of the agency's critics.

"There are a lot more questions about why we aren't doing things than there were just two years ago when I came here," he said. "The attitude in the country and in the media has changed, and we are being flagellated considerably less, which is fortunate."

The CIA's failure to predict the fall of the Shah of Iran has raised a fundamental question, however: are U.S. intelligence agencies providing the information and analysis that are vital to American policy makers?

Although a House Intelligence Committee report concluded that the CIA performed better in Iran than is generally recognized, the question persists. Some present and former intelligence officials who have chafed at the restrictions placed on the agency in recent years have cited Iran as evidence that criticism of the CIA has damaged national security.

An emerging majority of specialists in the field believes that American intelligence is very good—but not as good as it could be and possibly not as good as it us

esprit de corps that once characterized the CIA is gone. These individuals say that Senate and House investigations of intelligence abuses have sapped the agency's morale, that Turner has done nothing to restore it and that, in some ways, he has made things worse.

"Despite all the official statements, morale is still low," said one former official who served both overseas and in Washington. "Very, very good people are retiring five years before their pension is due. Turner is just not getting the job done, that's all."

Figures for 1977, 1978 and the first part of this year show that more and more CIA employees are taking early retirements.

An associate of Turner said that the retirements should not be seen as a distress signal. He said the CIA has scaled down its operations and therefore needs fewer operators.

Concerning charges that Turner has been bad for agency morale, this associate said, "I think it's a bum rap. You hear that most often from the old-timers who have retired or left the agency. This is the end of an era. The agency is 32 years old, and some people who were there from the start are reaching retirement age."

Many of these retirees lived through the CIA's most exciting years of covert political activities and secret wars, the official said. "We don't do that kind of thing anymore. It is a changing world," he said.

Created in 1947 as a successor to the World War II Office of Strategic Services, the Central Intelligence Agency was once in the front line of the cold war. For instance, a CIA-backed operation restored Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi to the Iranian throne in 1952. And the CIA conducted a secret war in Laos.

According to congressional investigators, the agency plotted assassinations of Fidel Castro and other leaders and experimented with drugs on unknowing subjects.

When Turner was named CIA director in March, 1977, he pledged that during his tenure the agency would never "do anything illegal with regard to American citizens." In other words, the requirements of national security would never be used to justify illegal activity.

It was a pledge that no other CIA director—and no intelligence chief anywhere else in the world—had ever made before. Even the CIA's harshest critics say they have no evidence that Turner has broken his word.

At the same time, the agency has phased out most of what used to be its stock in trade—covert actions intended to manipulate the politics of other countries. Now, according to all accounts, the agency concentrates on collecting information about military and political events throughout the world without trying to shape those events.

How effective is the CIA in performing its revised duties?

To a considerable extent, the answer any individual gives to that question is shaped by his opinion of the wisdom of restricting the agency's more controversial activities.

Advocates of restrictions to prevent the agency from infringing on the rights of Americans are likely to give the CIA passing marks for effectiveness. The agency's severest critics these days tend to be people who liked the CIA the way it used to be.